

**Opening Statement of Hon. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen  
Chair, Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia  
Hearing on “The Middle East Peace Process and  
U.S. Strategic Priorities Post-Disengagement”  
September 21, 2005**

On December 18, 2003, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon took a bold and unprecedented step.

At considerable political risk, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon demonstrated his commitment to peace by stating that Israel would unilaterally disengage from the Palestinians, by redeploying forces and relocating settlements.

After some revision, the Government of Israel approved a plan to withdraw from all 21 settlements in Gaza, four small settlements in the northern West Bank, and from the military installations protecting them. Israel’s disengagement from the Gaza Strip began on August 15<sup>th</sup>. On August 17<sup>th</sup>, Israeli police and soldiers began removing those who did not leave voluntarily.

Evacuation of the settlers from Gaza was completed on August 22<sup>nd</sup>, and from the northern West Bank on August 23<sup>rd</sup>. Israel’s military withdrawal from Gaza was completed last week.

The sadness and anguish exhibited by Israelis who had to abandon their homes, and by Israeli soldiers obliged to enforce the disengagement process, brings into context the extent of the sacrifices endured by the Israeli people throughout the years, for the sake of peace, and the many months of agonizing debate within Israel over this policy.

On the one hand, many within the Israeli populace decried that any pullback by Israel without security guarantees or other tangible steps by the Palestinian Authority, was a victory for the terrorists, and that the withdrawal from Gaza would lead to an exponential increase in terrorism launched from the Gaza Strip.

Others, such as Ambassador Dore Gold, addressed many of these core strategic issues and concerns in a briefing hosted by the Subcommittee this past July. In his most recent study *Defensible Borders for a Lasting Peace*, he focused on analyzing Israel's minimal territorial requirements to enable it to defend itself, in the aftermath of disengagement.

Others, led by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, argued that disengagement would bolster Israel's security, and that it represented an initiative aimed at altering the status quo with the Palestinians to Israel's advantage.

Nonetheless, Israel's disengagement from Gaza proceeded efficiently and smoothly. There were few violent incidents and in no case did an Israeli employ a weapon against another Israeli.

Conversely, lawlessness within the Gaza Strip and continued attacks against Israel has characterized the Palestinian response to disengagement. Israel's withdrawal was not yet a day old when Palestinian mortars began landing in Sderot.

The Palestinian destruction of greenhouses in vacated Jewish settlements in Gaza has denied them of a potential economic windfall from Israel's withdrawal.

In addition, by torching the synagogues and storming the Philadelphi route, they are not only signaling that they do not intend to behave responsibly, but that, they may transform Gaza into a major security threat.

Vast amounts of assault rifles, explosives, and other weaponry has reportedly been smuggled across the Egyptian frontier into Gaza in the past few days, confirming fears regarding the inability, or willingness, of the Palestinians and Egyptians to provide security along that border.

In the midst of this chaos, the spotlight has now clearly shifted to the Palestinian Authority, which must now show that it can effectively and successfully govern Gaza.

They must not only restore law and order, but verifiably dismantle the terrorist infrastructure in the Gaza Strip and ensure that it is not used as a staging ground for terrorist attacks on Israel. That government's failure to prevent terrorists from using Gaza as a haven, will undermine any hopes for progress toward peace.

These developments will have far reaching implications for U.S. post-disengagement policies, activities, operations, programs, and assistance. It is of the utmost importance that we review what specific requirements and conditions must be met, or not being met by the Palestinian Authority.

Included in this is the current level and composition of U.S. security assistance to the Palestinian authority the current status and constitution of Palestinian security forces.

What specific actions is the Palestinian Authority taking to counter-terrorism and terrorist financing in the West Bank and Gaza, including the dismantling of terrorist infrastructures, the confiscation of unlawful weaponry, and the disarmament of terrorist organizations?

What is the role of Egypt and Jordan regarding security in Gaza, in particular, and in the post-disengagement era, in general?

How are we tracking U.S. funding and security assistance to the Palestinians?

What impact will these developments have on our long-term security strategy in the region?

As a result of disengagement, is the Administration engaging in a reassessment of our overall strategy in the region?

What does the Administration view as the U.S. strategic priorities post-disengagement?

I would also like our witnesses to address the current status of the Road Map; prospects for Palestinian elections and political reform; the role of the Quartet and the international community, and long-term impact of disengagement on U.S. counterterrorism strategies in the region.

I would like to thank our distinguished witnesses for appearing before the Subcommittee today, and will now turn to the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee, Mr. Ackerman, for opening remarks.